

RETROCAUSALITY

The background of the cover features a dark, almost black, space-like environment. In the center, there is a glowing, swirling energy field or portal with a pinkish-purple hue. Within this field, a pixelated cityscape is visible, with a small car driving on a road. The city is composed of various geometric shapes and blocks, giving it a retro, digital feel. Surrounding the central field are several large, green, leaf-like or plant-like structures that appear to be floating or growing in the space.

EXCELLENT TIME TRAVEL ADVENTURES
BY PAUL MATIJEVIC



RETROCAUSALITY

First Edition Advanced Revised Master Essentials

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WELCOME TO RETROCAUSALITY!

Retrocausality is a roleplaying game about time travel. In this game, you and your group create a story about some time travellers and their adventures.

You create the characters, decide the challenges they face, and describe how they deal with them. To make things interesting, you'll use a deck of playing cards to add some uncertainty.

One member of the group will take on the role of the **Time Lord**¹, who narrates the world around the players, controls side characters (aka non-player characters, or NPCs), and handles most of the rules stuff. The other players each control one player character (PC).

WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY

You'll need **3-5 people**, including **your lovely self**.

You'll need at least one **copy of the rules** and one **deck of playing cards**.

Some **index cards** or something else to write on is also handy, along with some kind of **tokens**.

Time is important too, obviously. A game can be anywhere from an hour to three hours or more, and you can play multiple sessions if you want.

A **place to play** is also important. This place should be **comfortable, not too loud**, and **safe**. Have you considered **Steve's place**? He's cleaned up a lot and it really shines now.

Some kind of **snacks and drinks** to keep you going, whatever's your poison.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RETROCAUSALITY

Retrocausality was originally made in 2012 for a design contest on the Something Awful forums, where it won the coveted grand prize: an old copy of *The Complete Book of Elves* for ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® 2nd Edition signed by Magnús Scheving, creator and star of *LazyTown*.²

This updated edition, *Retrocausality First Edition: Advanced Revised Master Essentials*, was created through a Kickstarter campaign. Thank you to each and every backer for making this possible; you can find shout-outs at the end of the book.

I hope you enjoy this game! Even if you don't, I hope you find another game and enjoy that.

¹ In most games, this is just called something like “Game Master” or “Storyteller”. Most games don’t give you an excuse to say “I AM THE TIME LORD” though. Feel free to say something like “Time Lady”, “Mister Time”, or “Chrono Majordomo” instead if you like.

² Yes, I am still bragging about this.

GETTING STARTED

THE RULES OF TIME TRAVEL

When you start a game of *Retrocausality*, it's worth thinking about how time travel is going to work in the first place. Your group should figure this out together.

THE TIME MACHINE

Talk with your group about what your time machine actually *is*. A few words should be fine, so don't worry about the details too much. Here are some things you might want to think about:

- How big is your time machine? Is it portable? Can it be hidden? Is there a kind of phone booth that hasn't been taken yet?
- How many people can use it at once? Do you all have your own time machine, or is everyone carpooling? How many historical figures can you take with you?
- Does it have any special requirements? (Think the DeLorean needing to reach 88 mph.)
- Are you going to start the game with it? How will you discover it?

HOW TIME TRAVEL WORKS

As far as *Retrocausality* is concerned, *if it's possible, you can do it*. There are many kinds of time travel in fiction, each with their own special rules, and we haven't bothered choosing any here.

Instead, your group should discuss what rules *you* want. Again, you don't need to worry about this more than you want to—if it wouldn't be fun to have a discussion on ontological paradoxes before your dinosaur safari, don't bother. If it's fun, make it possible.

If you *do* come up with any rules, write them down and keep them handy. If you've got index cards one of those would be great, but anything you can read will do.

Here are some things you might think about:

- Is there a time travel story you're inspired by? (You can just say it works like that.)
- Can you create paradoxes? What happens if you do?
- What does it look like? Is it instantaneous or does time fast-forward/rewind around you?
- What happens if you stop your parents dating in high school?
- When you time travel, do you alter the timeline or create a new one?
- Does it matter?

These rules must be followed. If they say that someone who erases themselves from history fades away within a week, and your character accidentally runs their dad over with the time van and breaks it, you now have one week to fix it. You can add or change rules later, if the group agrees and it makes sense within the story.

CREATING CHARACTERS

Now it's time to make your characters!

EVERY CHARACTER HAS... □

- A **Deal**. What are they like?
- Some **Talents**, things your character is good at.
- A **Time Talent**, the kind of time travel your character is best at.
- A **Goal**, the reason you time travel in the first place.
- Any other **Details** you want to mention.

WHAT'S THEIR DEAL? □

What is your character like? It's up to you—you could be a slacker student, or a lady from the future, or maybe you're already picturing a timehopping samurai dentist whose best friend is a talking dog. As long as you have an idea you can work with, it's good. Write down their name and a few words about what their deal is.

It's a good idea to create characters as a group. You can get an idea of what will work well in the story you've planned, and you might come up with more ideas by playing off each other!

TALENTS □

Your character can do (or at least try) pretty much anything they seem capable of, as long as it makes sense in the story. Your character's Talents are the things they're the best at.

Write down three Talents. They can be anything you like, as long as it's interesting: occupations, hobbies, training, special powers, relationships, unique equipment, appearance, a catchphrase, and more. They should be:

Useful: Talents are the main way your character will try to advance the story, so they should have a purpose. Your character might have "Weird Facial Hair", but if you can't solve problems with it, it's kind of a waste.

Short: Could you say things like "I use my ____ Talent" or "Because I'm ____, I..." a few times a session without stopping for breath or being groaned at?

Broad: If you're a fireman, you don't need to write down a Talent for everything a fireman does—just write "Fireman" and it will cover anything a fireman would probably do or know. Don't make them *too* broad ("Best At Everything" is out), but they should have at least a few uses.

Clear: Can your group understand what it means? "I Love To Bacon!" might be a great in joke with your friend Steve, but if you have to explain what it means to your group you should consider reworking it instead.

Assign each of the numbers **1**, **2**, and **3** to a Talent. The higher the number, the better you are at it. Don't worry if you can't think of three—as long as you have at least one Talent, you can fill in the rest as you go. See p. 9 for more.

TIME TALENT

When it comes to Fun Things To Do With Time Travel, nothing is off-limits to the players (unless you wrote a rule that says it is). Different characters approach time travel in different ways though. Your character's Time Talent is a particular use of time travel they're good at.

Each character has one Time Talent. First, pick one of these Skills:

- **Fetch:** Taking something from one time period and using it in another.
- **History:** Interacting with important events, people, and objects.
- **Observe:** Finding things and getting information.
- **Twin:** Working with your own past and future selves.

Then, place a Suit next to it. This defines what specific situations you're best with:

- ♠ means you're good at dealing with time travellers and their actions.
- ♥ means you're good in social situations.
- ♣ means you're good with physical actions.
- ♦ means you're good at learning and using knowledge.

See p. 21-26 for more on how Time Talents work.

GOAL

What does your character want to accomplish during the game? This can be as immense or mundane as you like, as long as it's something you can work towards.

When you accomplish your Goal, replace it with a new one. You can also change your Goal at the beginning of every session, if you play more than one.

DETAILS

If there's anything you want to add, now's the time. This is a great place to note important relationships, interesting possessions, your collection of dead things in jars, and other things that didn't quite fit under your character's Talent but would make them more interesting.

Feel free to expand this list as you time travel, if there's something you want to mention getting—wealth, period-appropriate backup outfits, the *Mona Lisa*, etc.

Retrocausality can be used alongside another game—for example, you could use it to introduce a time travel plot to an existing *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign.

In these kinds of games, all you need to do is write down a Time Talent, use *Retrocausality's* time travel rules, and use the other game's rules for everything else.

EXAMPLE CHARACTER CREATION

Jack Jackson is setting up a game of *Retrocausality* with his friends: Chloe, Ryan, Fatima, and Jack (no relation). Jackson is the Time Lord.

First, they get together and talk about what their game is going to be like. They decide to take inspiration from *Popular 80s Film* and make it about people from the mid-00s who go on adventures in a time-travelling 60s minivan. After some discussion, they decide to start with these rules for time travel and figure out more later:

- If they make any changes that stop them being born, they fade away a week later.
- If they make any changes to their own past, they *don't* create a new version of themselves who lived this different life.
- The van uses electric power and can last one week before it needs a recharge.
- The van must be travelling at a nice 69 miles per hour to time travel.

Chloe already has a character in mind. Inspired by her own school experiences, she creates a history undergrad named **Mei Lin**. Mei Lin tries to balance her studies with working at her dad's failing video rental business, but really she just wants to laze around watching martial arts movies all day. Chloe pencils that in as her character's **Deal**.

Now she needs three **Talents**. For the first, Chloe uses *History Undergrad* from her Deal. For the second she takes the martial arts thing one step further and says Mei Lin's a *Martial Artist*. Since she has one for knowledge and one for fighting, Chloe adds one for social situations: *Easygoing Attitude*, because she's relaxed and easy to talk to. She just assigns numbers in the order she wrote them down: *History Undergrad 3, Martial Artist 2, Easygoing Attitude 1*.

Next is her **Time Talent**. Chloe picks ♣ as her Suit because it fits the character, then *Twin* as her Skill so she can make a "Lin Twins" joke that only Jack finds funny.

Ryan has a few player characters they like to re-use sometimes. For this game Ryan picks **Yvonne "Vonnie" Malfête**, a refined lady who usually acts as the brains of the group.

Ryan skips the Deal for now and goes for **Talents**. *Book Smarts* and *Ladylike Grace* fit Vonnie well. Chloe asks if Mei Lin knows Vonnie, and the two of them decide that Vonnie is a high school friend whose fathers run a successful tech business. Ryan makes her third Talent *Tech Company Heiress* to give her money and tech skills. They assign numbers in order of seeming importance: *Book Smarts 3, Tech Company Heiress 2, Ladylike Grace 1*.

Ryan isn't sure about her **Time Talent**, so they decide to see what everyone else does first. Later they give Vonnie *History* ♥, because nobody else picked either of those.

Fatima wants to play the professor who invented the time machine. She likes to think about what her character is like before doing anything else, so she focuses on her character's **Deal**. She remembers another 80s movie she liked as a child, the Australian comedy *Young Einstein*, and decides she's playing an eccentric Australian (but I repeat myself) who used to be in a band. His name is **Ross Mundy**, and he came up with the tech that makes time travel possible after accidentally electrocuting himself with a guitar.

Fatima also writes in some **Details** about his home, the inventor business that funds his experiments, and so on. You can write as much or as little as you like, and she prefers much.

Mundy's **Time Talent** comes to her next—he tries not to interfere, so she goes with *Observe* ♦.

Next, **Talents**. Based off his Deal and Details, Fatima decides to give him *Genius Inventor* for his science skills, lean into the band stuff with *Former Rocker*, and make him a mentor figure with *Inspiring Teacher*. Fatima assigns numbers based on how often she thinks they'll come up in the story: *Genius Inventor* 3, *Former Rocker* 1, *Inspiring Teacher* 2.

Next up is Jack. Jack likes the sound of the mid-00s and decides to base his character on a younger version of himself. **Jack Sanchez** is a kid who works for an inventor part-time (this part actually happened but nobody believes him) and plays guitar badly instead of studying.

Jack prefers to fill in the details during play, so he sets aside Details and the rest of his Deal for now and goes to **Talents**. Vonnie has *Book Smarts*, so an obvious complement is *Street Smarts*. Jack likes collecting gear, so he negotiates a Talent for that: a *Pack of Useful Things* that Sanchez carries around. (It can only contain things that Sanchez can safely obtain and store at home.)

Jack can fill in the last one later, so he leaves it for now and assigns *Street Smarts* 3, *Pack of Useful Things* 2. He'll see how the first session plays out before finishing his Talents.

For his **Time Talent**, Jack chooses *Fetch* because it dovetails nicely with the Pack. He's not sure about the Suit, so he draws a card from the deck to decide and gets ♣. (Time Talents can overlap, so it doesn't matter that Mei Lin has the same Suit.)

The group decided to set aside **Goals** until the very end. Because Goals can change during play, Jack (Time Lord) will use their opening Goals to set the plot in motion.

Fatima already wrote Mundy's: *Test the time van* seemed obvious. Chloe decides to use Mei Lin's deal: *Do something about dad's failing business*. Ryan kind of wants Vonnie to be dragged into this by accident Rembrandt Brown-style, so they decide to fill in her first Goal later. Jack (player) thinks about why Jack (character) got a job, and goes with *Save up for a sweet guitar*.

And they're done! The game begins, and Time Lord Jack begins to set the scene...



HOW TO PLAY

DOING THINGS

Many roleplaying games feature characters doing things, and *Retrocausality* is no exception. If what you're trying to do is difficult, you'll need to draw a card to see if you succeed.

At the start of the session, shuffle a deck of playing cards and place it face-down on the table. **When you want to do something difficult, or there's something in your way, draw a card and show it to the group.**

TARGETS

When you draw a card, you're aiming for a **target**: either a number or a suit. Generally suits are used for time travel and numbers are used for everything else, but the Time Lord can do things differently. The target and your card determine your **outcome** (which we'll talk about next).

NUMBERS

Draw a card and look at the number. Add any bonuses you get (from a Talent, for example). Compare the total to your target.

- If you *beat or match the target*, it's a **success**.
- If you *beat your target by at least 4*, it's an **excellent success**.
- If you *don't reach the target*, you **fail**.
- If you *failed by at least 4*, it's a **bogus failure**.

Cards without numbers are special:

- An Ace is an **excellent success**.
- A King is a **success**.
- A Queen is a **bogus success**.
- A Jack is a **failure**.
- A Joker is an **excellent failure**.

SUITS

Draw a card and check the suit: ♠ Spades, ♥ Hearts, ♣ Clubs, or ♦ Diamonds.

- If the card's suit matches the target suit, it's a **success**.
- If you have the *wrong suit but the right colour*, it's a **bogus success**.
- If you have the *wrong suit and the wrong colour*, it's a **failure**.
- If you have a Joker, it's an **excellent failure**.

OUTCOMES

When you draw a card, there are four possible **outcomes**:

SUCCESS & FAILURE

Success means you get what you want. Trying to capture a dinosaur? You got that dino.

Failure means you don't get what you want. What this means depends on what the GM finds interesting; you could just not get it (the dino gets away), or a new challenge comes up that you have to deal with instead (the dino's mum shows up and she's angry). Either way, it's bad.

Every outcome is either a success or failure. But they can *also* be...

EXCELLENT

An **excellent** outcome is better than you expected. You get a little bonus, chosen by the Time Lord: you could do something really well, overcome an extra challenge, avoid an upcoming challenge, or just get a welcome side-effect.

An *excellent success* is like saying “yes, and...”. Trying to talk some guards into taking you to see Napoleon? Yes, and they put in a good word for you too. Want to track a guy who stole a sports almanac from the future? Yes, and he leaves it unattended as you spy on him.

An *excellent failure* is like saying “no, but...”. You don't get what you want, but you still get *something*, even if it doesn't solve the problem at hand. Think “happy accident”. Trying to avoid a murder charge in the 1850s? No, but passing lawyer Abraham Lincoln takes an interest in your case. Trying to stop a time traveller? No, but you learn their true identity. Excellent failures don't happen often, so bonus points if you make them as implausible, dramatic, or stylish as possible.

BOGUS

A **bogus** outcome is excellent's evil robot double. The Time Lord makes things a little worse: you can screw up bad, break something important, or create even more problems.

A *bogus success* means you only get some of what you want, or a mistake tarnishes your victory. It's like saying “yes, but...” Want to stop somebody in a 1920s car chase? Yes, but you trash your car in the process. Trying to bring a dinosaur to the present? Yes, but you get scratched up in the process. You still succeed, but it could have gone better.

A *bogus failure* is like saying “no, and...”. Want to stop somebody in a 1920s car chase? No, and you trash your car in the process. Trying to get a really good curry in the past? No, and you get mixed up in the assassination of President Kennedy. You didn't just fail, you failed *bad*.

TOKENS

When you get an excellent result, take a token. You may spend an excellent token at any time to:

- Turn a bogus failure into a failure.
- Turn a failure into a bogus success.
- Turn a bogus success into a success.
- Request a favourable story event when you need it—for example, when you're escaping from someone on foot, a bike you can “borrow” happens to appear around the corner. (If you can't negotiate an appropriate event with the group, keep the token.)

You can only store one excellent token at a time, so don't be afraid to spend it.

When you get a bogus result, the Time Lord takes a token. They can spend a bogus token at any time to create problems for you:

- Make a numbered card be worth 1 less.
- Create an unfortunate story event or an extra challenge to mess with you.

Even Time Lords have limits: they can store one bogus token per player, can only spend it on the player who got the bogus outcome, and can't use a bogus token to undo an excellent success.



OPPONENTS

Sometimes, you'll draw a card because someone is trying to stop you from succeeding—maybe you're in a car chase with some Martians, or arm-wrestling Roosevelt, or whatever.

If they're not that important, the Time Lord just sets a target: if you beat the target, you beat them. But if they're an important side character, or you're facing off against another player, each side of the conflict draws a card. Treat it like a number target:

- Both characters (the Time Lord does side characters) draw a card and show it to the group.
- Add any relevant bonuses.
- Compare both totals. The highest wins. If there's a tie, draw again.

For simplicity, **Jack**, **Queen**, and **King** are treated as **10**, **11**, and **12**. **Ace** automatically beats other cards. **Joker** is an automatic loss, but you can still keep it like an excellent card. If both sides draw Aces or Jokers, highest bonus wins. If it's still a tie, Time Lord decides.

You can read the face cards the way they're described on p.9 instead if you like, if there's a way to do that which makes sense.

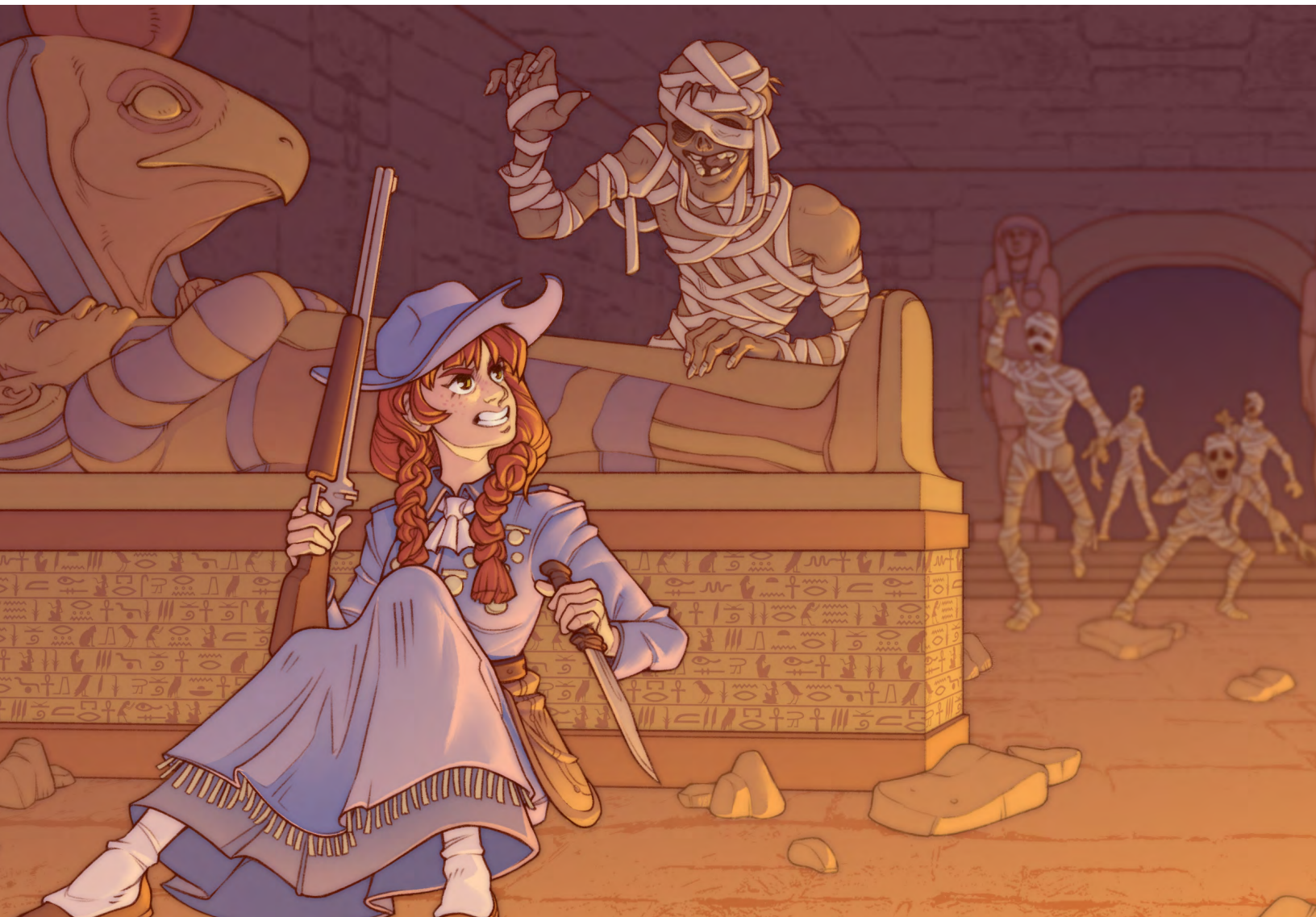


TABLE MANAGEMENT

SHUFFLING THE DECK

The deck should be shuffled before you start, but how often you re-shuffle it is ultimately up to your group. Your odds of success change over time the longer you don't, but not by much.

We recommend keeping a discard pile of used cards and shuffling it back into the deck after a set time, like every 20 cards or after major scene changes, to keep cards circulating. If you'd like to introduce some strategy, hold off until you get down to 10 cards. (You can even leave it to the end, if knowing exactly what the last card is sounds fun to you.)

TOKENS

Tokens can be anything: coins, dice, beads, a hastily-typed note if you're playing online. If you want to track them in more detail, consider writing on index cards. The one thing we would not recommend is using something edible unless you're *certain* you won't eat it too early.

If you like, you can just keep excellent/bogus cards and spend those. (The Time Lord holds on to your bogus card.) This is how *Retrocausality* originally worked. However, keep in mind that a card you're holding is a card you can't draw, which can reduce your odds of success.

If you feel like experimenting, you're free to get weird with the rules. This could be as simple as changing what the face cards mean, but there's no reason you can't change everything. There are plenty of card decks besides the standard 52-card one, and plenty of card games you can draw inspiration from.

For example, a Rider-Waite-Smith tarot deck could be useful if your time travel is magical. In this case the Page, Knight, Queen, and King are treated as Jack, Queen, King, and Ace respectively. Wands, Pentacles, Cups, and Swords are treated as Spades, Diamonds, Hearts, and Clubs. The Major Arcana are shuffled into the deck, and failure or success is interpreted based on what you drew and what you were doing at the time. (0 — The Fool is always an excellent failure.)

Have fun with it! If you're unsure, a good rule of thumb is that most players will have fun if they get some kind of success ~60% of the time. This isn't game design gospel you should stick to if it gets in the way, though.



TIME TRAVEL

THE BASICS

This chapter covers our time travel rules. We're aiming to keep these rules as simple and flexible as possible—time travel can be complicated enough without figuring out what you're supposed to draw.

Here's the short version:

1. At the start of the game, set the **rules of time travel**.
2. Set up a **Timeline** of important events (p. 17).
3. Decide what **type** of time travel action you're attempting (p. 21-23).
4. Attempt the action and **draw a card** (p. 24).
5. Check your result and **change the Timeline** (p. 25).

SETTING THE RULES

There are a lot of different ways time travel can work. Pick any two time travel stories, and odds are they'll use it three different ways. Instead of picking and enforcing our own favourite version, we'll assume you'll pick the one that works best for you.

This is mostly done at the start of the game, as outlined on p. 3. Once you figure out some time travel rules with your group and write them down, those rules define everything the player characters can do in the game. If it's possible you can do it, and you decide what's possible.

You can write as much or as little as you want. You can add rules, change rules, or even come up with new forms of time travel that have their own rules during play, provided the group agrees and it makes some kind of sense within the story. If *Doctor Who* can do it while waving its hands and saying something funny about timey-wimey balls, so can you.

If you really want to lean into the wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey stuff, try this rule: Players can spend an excellent token to break the established rules of time travel, as long as they can either a) come up with a reasonable explanation or, more likely, b) say something incredibly vague and wishy-washy in a confident way.

A FEW EXAMPLES

For reference, here's a non-exhaustive list of ways time travel can be portrayed.

Don't Think About It: If you like, you can just describe your time machine and not establish firm time travel rules. This *laissez-faire* style is great for oneshots and convention games.

It's Like X: If you have a particular time travel story in mind already, you can just write that down. If you say "it works like *Back to the Future*", anything that would fly in *Back to the Future* is fine here. (Make sure it's something everyone is familiar with.)

Unchanging History: With this method there is only one timeline, and anything you do just makes it happen. If you go back in time to stop something happening, your actions turn out to be the cause. If you keep trying to break history, bad things might happen to you.

This is related to the Novikov self-consistency principle, which suggests that the probability of creating a paradox is zero. Novikov games force you to explain your actions very carefully. *Examples: 12 Monkeys, By His Bootstraps, Terminator I, Red Dwarf, Doctor Who*

Enforced History: History *can* be changed, but some force is trying to stop you. This could be some kind of monster that destroys paradoxes (or time travellers), time cops (who hopefully aren't like the regular kind), or just a natural force of the universe. Depending on the work, level of enforcement can vary from "just don't mess with the important bits" to "kill all time travellers". *Examples: C°ntinuum, Feng Shui, Homestuck, The Hounds of Tindalos, Singularity Sky, Steins;Gate, Doctor Who*

Divergent Timelines: In some stories, changing the past actually sends you to an alternate timeline instead of "replacing" the original. Kill your grandfather, and you'll just end up in a timeline where you were never born. Any timelines you create continue running when you're gone. Details like this don't always *matter*, but in some works people from different timelines can exchange information or even visit each other. *Examples: Dragon Ball, Dr. McNinja, Homestuck, Star Trek, The Legend of Zelda, Doctor Who*

Ripple Effect: In some stories, changes made in the past gradually change the future. If you stop your parents making out, you (and any selfies you brought with you) start to fade out of existence. If you don't fix it in time, you're gone for good. This is a good way to add some tension to your time travel action, if you want it. *Examples: Back to the Future, Doctor Who* probably

San Dimas Time: Another way to add tension is to have your time travel run on San Dimas Time. When you use time travel to leave one place and go to another, time in both places passes at the same rate. if you leave your hometown at noon and mess around in medieval France for three hours, you come back at 3PM. If someone in 1995 writes a message to someone in 2019, the 2019 person watches the message appear as it's written. Sometimes this is due to the nature of time travel (e.g. a time portal or another mechanism that stays "running" in the present), and sometimes nobody asks how it works. *Examples: Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure, Stargate Continuum, X-Men: Days of Future Past, Doctor Who*

Primer: I would not recommend making time travel work like *Primer*.

TIME TRAVEL 101: THE TIMELINE

Retrocausality has no specific list of time travel moves. If it's possible, you can do it. The way we see it, if Bill & Ted can recruit Genghis Khan to help out with a high school project within hours of getting their first machine, *your* character is probably fine.

To track all the different things you do, *Retrocausality* uses the **Timeline**.

MAKING THE TIMELINE

The Timeline is a record of your adventures: every important story event, everything you've changed with time travel, and how you did it. Have you ever Googled a time travel movie and found a diagram that tries to explain what actually happened? You're making one of those.

A Timeline can track the events of a particular moment, a session, an adventure, or even your entire game. You can make new Timelines for any of these at any time.

To make a Timeline:

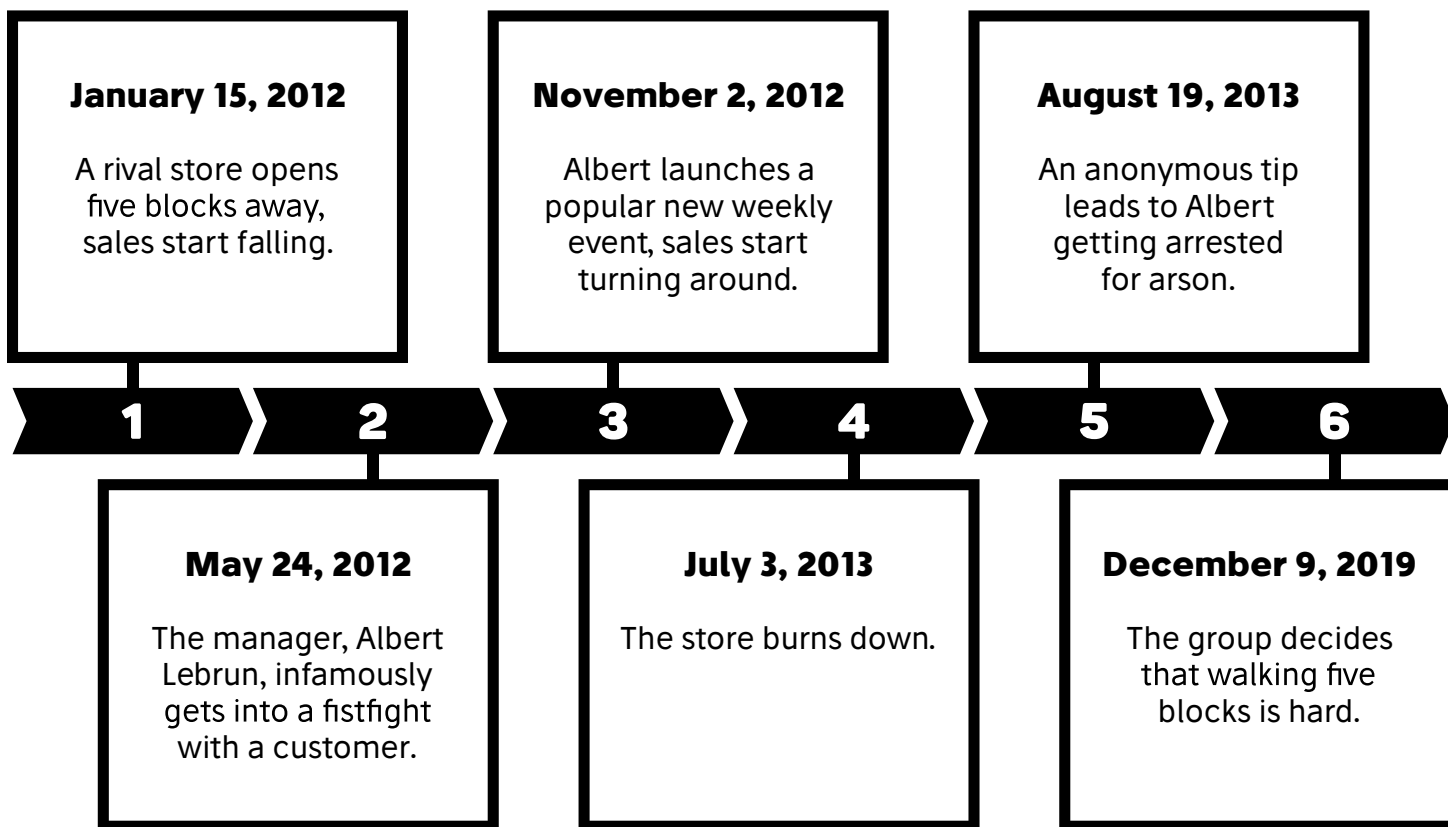
1. The Time Lord decides how much time it covers—a few moments, a day, maybe even years.
2. The Time Lord decides which Events are important enough to go on the Timeline.
3. These Events are written on index cards. (Short phrases are fine.)
4. Events are placed on the table in chronological order.
5. When something important happens in the story, add an Event for it.
6. When the characters use time travel, add an Event for it.

We suggest index cards so it's easy to change or replace them later, but they're not essential. Read through the Timeline rules and choose the method that works for you.

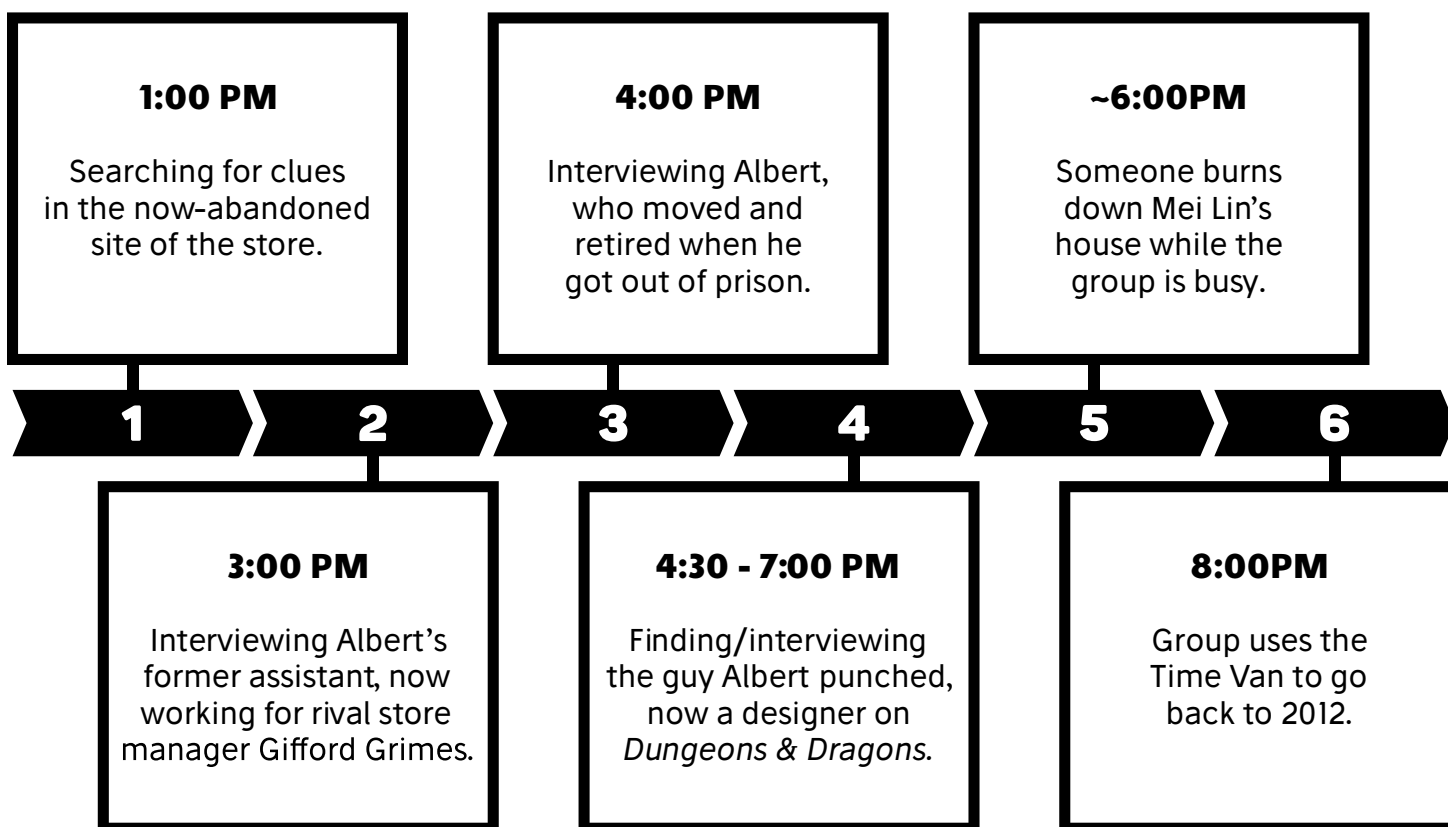
CHOOSING EVENTS

An Event is important if you decide it's relevant to the story. Is it a reason the story is happening? Is it something a character wants to change (or did)? Is it something the characters will *want* to change? Did someone fail in an interesting way? Do you feel like it? It could go on the Timeline.

For example, say the characters decide to bring back a tabletop game store they really liked because they can't be bothered walking five blocks to the next one every time they want to buy something. The characters can just Google what happened, and the Time Lord makes that the first Timeline:



The players decide to look for clues before time travelling. When their investigation gets weird around 6PM, they decide to make a separate Timeline to track it just in case.

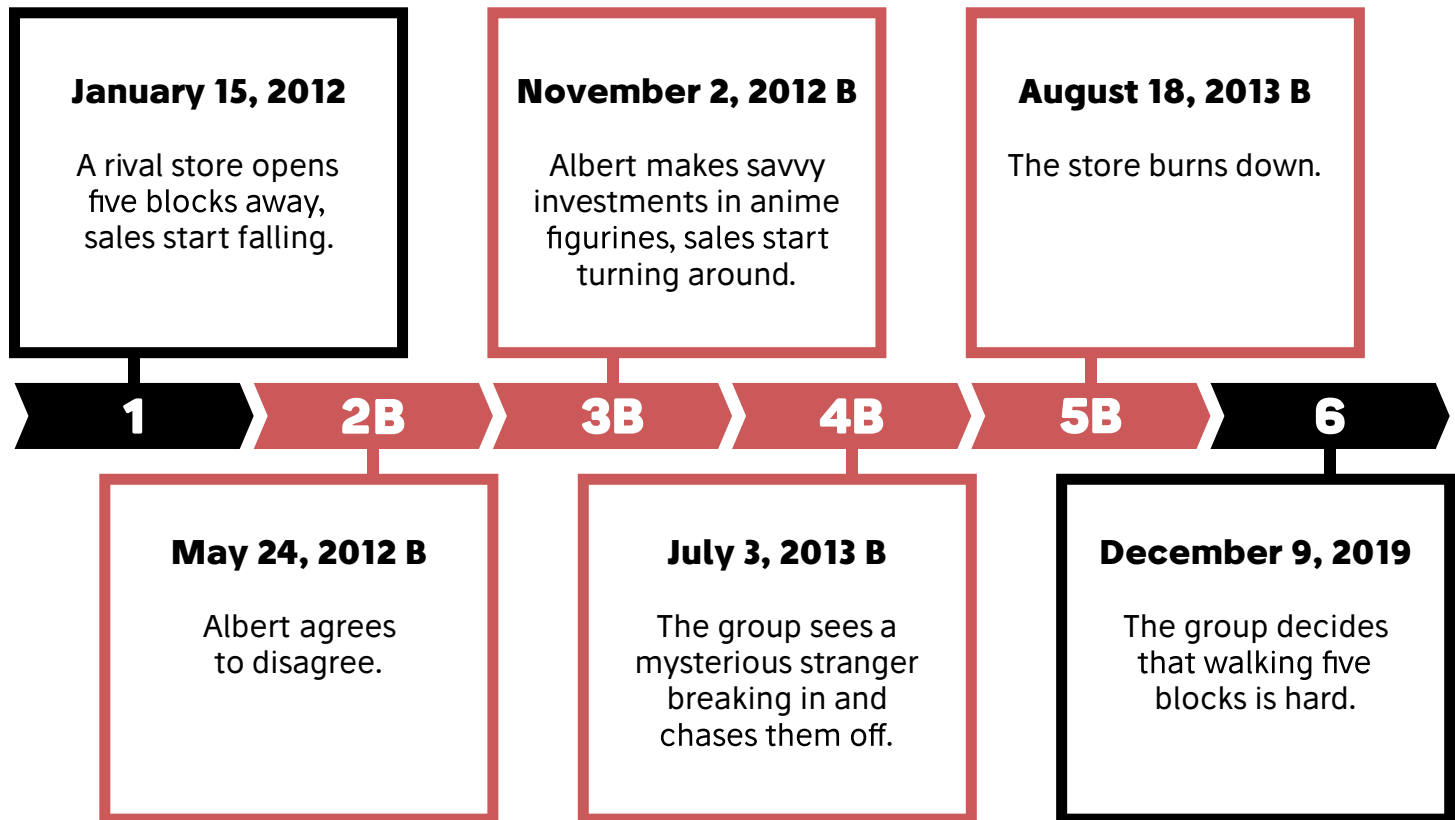


CHANGING THE TIMELINE

When you use time travel, you change the Timeline.

When someone goes back and changes an Event, intentionally or no, create a new Event card and place it on top of the old one. If this would drastically change future Events or create new ones, the Time Lord may change the rest of the Timeline to accomodate this.

In our example, say the characters go back to May 24 2012, convince Albert not to get into his infamous fight, and see if that changes anything. When it doesn't, they go to the date the store burns down, find someone there, and chase them off. The Timeline becomes:



The store is still gone, but they've managed to eliminate a suspect and score some leads. Now that they're sure it's an arsonist, the group remembers Mei Lin's house burned down and rushes there in the Time Van... just in time to catch Gifford Grimes.

It's up to the group how to proceed from there. They could go to August 18 2013 and get Gifford arrested, leave the Timeline as-is if Albert seems happy with how things turned out in the end, or even go back to 2011 and stop Gifford from setting up a rival store in the first place. Whatever happens, the Timeline can be changed as many times as their time travel rules allow.



TIME TIPS

- Consider making the start of the adventure an Event, in case it ends with the characters stopping it from happening.
- You don't need to write down every detail of every Event. The broad strokes are fine.
- Don't be afraid to merge or delete Events to save space. For example, the investigation Timeline on p. 18 could be compressed into one Event. If it seems like clutter, ditch it.
- If you're planning a twist or revelation later, don't put it in the Timeline. For example, if Gifford is Albert from the future, save the Events that explain how for when the players find out.
- Don't oversaturate the Timeline. Too many Events at once makes things hard to track.
- It might help to mark which Events were caused by time travel and which trips made which changes. Letters, symbols, or coloured pens are some ways you can do this.
- Every time travel trip should progress the story in some way, even if it doesn't fix everything.
- The Time Lord usually decides how the Timeline changes in response to player actions, but you can ask the players for input if they have fun ideas.

TIME TRAVEL 102: TIME TALENTS

Now that we've covered the Timeline, let's discuss how you interact with it.

FIRST, DO SOME TIME TRAVEL

By now, you've probably got a time machine. If not, go get one.

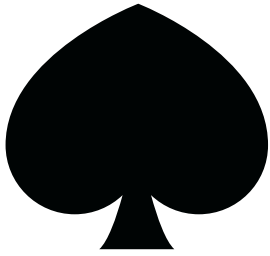
TIME TRAVEL ACTIONS

Your character can try to use time travel in any way they like, provided it's something they'd be capable of and it's possible within the rules of time travel. All possible actions are divided into broad categories, based on what you're trying to do and how you do it. Each one has:

- A **Suit**, which describes the action's **focus**: *what* you're using time travel to mess with, or *what* you hope to accomplish. This also sets the action's target.
- A **Skill**, which describes the action's **method**: *how* you're using time travel to get what you want. This is used to narrow down what your character's good at.

The Time Master decides which Suits and Skills time travel actions fall under. Wait, was it Time Master or Time Lord? Oh well, whatever.

THE SUITS



EVENTS

Spades focuses on more “meta” uses of time travel—when the focus is on time travel or the timeline itself. Interfering with the actions of other time travellers, inserting yourself into events you’ve witnessed without changing them, or maintaining and altering your time machine could all come under Spades.



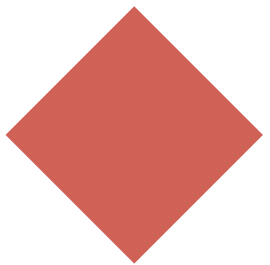
SOCIAL

Hearts focuses on people—manipulating them, finding them, and so on. If the focus is on getting someone to do something, it's probably Hearts. Convincing your parents to date, bribing a President, or getting Marie Curie to time travel with you are all examples of Hearts.



PHYSICAL

Clubs focuses on physical acts. If the focus is on interacting with a specific object, your ability to pull off a physical feat, or physically forcing someone to do something, it's probably Clubs. Stealing a car from another time, beating the crap out of Pinochet, and wrangling a dinosaur into your time machine and unleashing it in Stalin's bedroom are all Clubs.



KNOWLEDGE

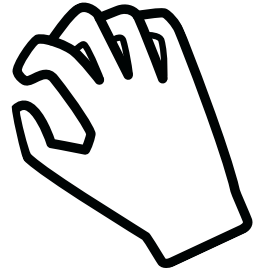
Diamonds focuses on the collection or manipulation of data—learning things, bringing knowledge from one time to another, delivering messages to the right person at just the right time, and so on. If the focus is on collecting or relaying specific information, it's probably Diamonds.

THE SKILLS

FETCH

Taking something from one time period and using it to your advantage in another—hopefully without breaking history in the process.

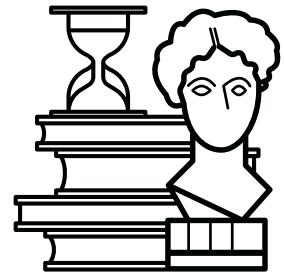
- ♠: Repairing your time machine with another period's tech
- ♥: Bringing a historical person into another time period
- ♣: Bringing high-tech stuff into the past, or a relic into the future
- ♦: Using stock market data or a Gray's Almanac to make money



HISTORY

Interacting with important people or events from history, with the careful touch they need. This includes interacting with other time travellers.

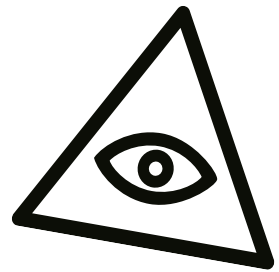
- ♠: Reverting or tweaking “edits” made by other time travellers
- ♥: Convincing a historical figure to do something important
- ♣: Putting an object in just the right spot, or borrowing it unseen
- ♦: Tampering with a message to control a specific event



OBSERVE

Finding or looking at things without changing them. (Save that for later.)

- ♠: Finding the perfect time to do something, hiding in time
- ♥: Finding or gathering info on others without being caught
- ♣: Finding things—relics, things that shouldn't be here, your keys
- ♦: Scoping out possible futures, searching texts and records



TWIN

Using your past and future selves to set up complicated stunts. As long as you remember to do whatever it was your future self did when you were your past self, everything will be fine.

- ♠: “Revealing” that an event was a future you all along
- ♥: Convincing your past self, staging an intervention
- ♣: Helping yourself in a car chase, battle of the bands, or WWII
- ♦: Doing a load of research at once, multi-self insurance scams



WHEN YOU ATTEMPT A TIME TRAVEL ACTION...

1. Create an Event for the moment you time travel if you haven't already.

You might be coming back to tell yourself not to in a minute.

2. Work out the action's Suit and Skill.

Pick the ones that best describe the action's focus—what the character is hoping to achieve or what's most important in the story. The Time Lord has the final say in this.

3. Determine the target.

Time travel actions use suit targets, so it's the action's Suit. Easy peasy lemon squeezy.

4. Draw a card and see what happens.

See the next page.



*guess who met their ancestor
at the Siege of Osaka LOL!*

 23  137  69

 So cool! 

  HA!

 LOL 

TIME OUTCOMES

MOST OF THE TIME...

If the card's suit matches the target suit, it's a *success*. Whatever you were trying to do, you pull it off successfully. Create your new Event card as desired.

If you have the wrong suit but the right colour, it's a *bogus success*. It's still a success, but things don't *quite* go your way. Usually this means the Time Lord makes an unintended bad Event further down the Timeline, or something else comes up that you have to deal with.

If you have the wrong suit and the wrong colour, it's a *failure*. When you're using time travel, this usually means you mess up the Timeline. The Time Lord creates an Event representing your mistake and changes the Timeline to accomodate it, or something happens that forces you to approach the problem in a different way¹. You've made things worse, and now you have some new problems to fix—but you can try to salvage it!

If you somehow drew a Joker, it's an *excellent failure*. Even if you were just trying to catch the breakfast special at Burger Kong, you've managed to step on a butterfly or something and blow up the Timeline. You might stumble into something useful in the process, but you've got a lot of fixing to do!

WITH YOUR TIME TALENT...

Your Time Talent increases your odds of success, and your successes are better overall.

If the card's suit matches the target suit, it's an *excellent success*. Not only do you pull it off, the outcome looks even better than you were expecting. Maybe you create really nice Events further down the Timeline, or you get something useful you can use later.

If you have the wrong suit but the right colour, it's a *success*. No bogus for you.

If you have your card's paired suit, it's a *bogus success*. We pair the suits like this:



This means that if you have the wrong suit and the wrong colour, you can still get a bogus success. For example, if your target is ,  or  would normally be a failure, but with your Time Talent,  becomes a bogus success. If your Time Talent is a ,  is a bogus success.

If you don't have any of these, it's still a *failure*. Sorry.

If you somehow drew a Joker, it's still an *excellent failure*. I'm so sorry.

¹ The Time Lord can always take input from the players .

SCOPE AND ZOOMING IN

How much you can achieve in one time travel action is up to your group. Sometimes it makes sense to fold a bunch of small actions into a single large one: for example, if you use History ♥ to get Diogenes to help you, you can usually assume you don't have to try and find him first. If a time travel action has several steps but there's only one interesting one, you're safe to just skip to that one.

Other times an action might have multiple steps that sound interesting to play through, or there are multiple points where a time traveller could fail in interesting ways, or the action being proposed represents an incredible amount of effort (e.g. undoing the United States' history of undermining democratic governments in Latin America). In these cases, it might make more sense to “zoom in” and play through each step as separate actions.

This is especially useful when you want to get the whole group involved. A complex action like assembling a team of history's greatest scientists to capture and study Dracula during WWII could be split into multiple steps, each with their own targets, and then the group could decide how to share the workload. Depending on what targets you set, this could also give everyone more chances to shine with their Time Talents.

You don't need to make each step a time travel action. Sometimes, it might be more appropriate to use a combination of time travel and regular actions. For example, if you decide to have your future self steal someone's keys from the past and leave them nearby for you to find, you *could* just use a Twin ♣ action, but if you're stealing them from a locked policeman's office, you could have another party member distract the police or help you break in. (Failure/bogus outcomes on “mundane” actions attempted in other time periods can affect the Timeline like a time travel action, if the Time Lord has a suitable idea.)

Sometimes, a time travel action can be turned into an entire adventure. A lot of *Back to the Future* could technically be done with one action, but that wouldn't be nearly as fun. Instead, consider going with a time action that just gets things started (like Observe ♠ to figure out when your parents were conceived, or History ♥ to befriend your grandparents) and treating the rest as a whole adventure. For example, if you want to steal something from a locked casino vault in the 90s, why only try Fetch ♣ when your group could play through a daring heist?²

It's up to you when you want to “zoom in” on the time shenanigans, and when you're fine with pulling back. Go with whatever seems fun!

² Also, the casino owner is a time traveller and they have a time machine in their office. Part of the con is Kansas City Shuffling them into going back and changing something for you. This adventure will be great. Trust me on this.



EXAMPLE: GOOD ROCKIN' TONIGHT

After a great adventure where Mei Lin and her friends helped Igor Kurchatov get his hands on the Manhattan Project's notes in 1944, they decide to get some pizza to celebrate. On a whim, Mei Lin decides she wants to get pizza in 1970s New York.

Time Lord Jackson decides a single time travel action can represent the whole trip. Normally he wouldn't even make them draw a card for something so trivial, but he'd like to have a 70s adventure and he knows enough about the decade to think up some interesting results either way. The group agrees, and Jack decides this is an **Observe ♣** action.

It was Mei Lin's idea, so Chloe draws and gets **K♥**—Kings don't count for anything in suit targets, so that's a **failure**. Whoops.

"The King" gives Jack an idea, though: Mei Lin hits Elvis Presley with the Time Van.

Mei Lin knocks Elvis out and breaks his leg. While Jack (the character) tends to him and Mei Lin panics, Ryan has Vonnie talk to his bodyguard Red West. Red tells her Elvis has a show in Madison Square Garden to get to. Vonnie suggests taking Elvis to the future, having his leg healed there, and dropping him off at the show.

Jackson says this can count as **Fetch ♣**, since the focus of the action is using future tech to heal someone. Since that happens to be Jack's **Time Talent**, he gives it a try and draws a **4♦**. The low number doesn't matter since it's a suit target. Since ♦ is ♣'s paired suit, it's a **bogus success**. (Because it's a bogus result, Jackson takes a token.)

With Red's help Jack drugs Elvis and checks him into a hospital in distant 2045, where his leg can be healed in a day. (Since they can get public health care in the future, they don't have to pay anything.) Then they drop off the pair outside Madison Square Garden and get that pizza.

Afterwards, the group return to their own time—where they discover a bad future. After some research (not Observe, they just use Google) they realise that Red had looked up how Elvis died when Jack was distracted and tried to save his life, but ended up accidentally ending Elvis' musical career earlier. The bad future is an indirect result of Elvis' diminished legacy.

The group rushes back to confront Red. Jackson decides that meddling with Red's meddling is **History** ♠. Since that's nobody's Time Talent, Ryan decides to try with Vonnie. Unfortunately, they draw **Joker**—an **excellent failure**. When Vonnie tries to drive the group back to Madison Square Garden five minutes after they left, she accidentally runs over Red *and* Elvis.

On the bright side, Ryan gets an excellent token to spend later.

After some light panicking, the group comes up with a plan. First, Vonnie goes back in time four minutes and tries to convince Red to talk over pizza. Since this part is just diplomacy Jackson would normally make it a number target, but since Vonnie is specifically trying to get Red out of here before her past self shows up, they go with **Fetch** ♥. Ryan draws **10** ♠, a **failure**. Just having Red stand around would be boring, so Jackson creates a new challenge.

Jackson decides that Red knocks Vonnie down and flees with Elvis instead. Mei Lin decides to use her Time Talent and have her future selves intercept him with **Twin** ♣. Chloe draws a **4** ♣—an **excellent success**! A Lin Twins roadblock stops Red in his tracks, and that's enough to convince him to talk things out after all. (Chloe gets an excellent token.)

Meanwhile, Jack gets to work. To make sure moving Red doesn't mess anything else up, he uses the Time Van to steal some wax sculptures, dress them up like Red and Elvis, and prop them up on the sidewalk where Vonnie ran them over. Jackson decides that editing Vonnie's "accident" so she only ran over some wax people is **Fetch** ♠. Jack draws **A** ♠, a **success**. (Like Chloe's King, Aces don't normally do anything special in suit targets.)

Afterward, the group talks with Red and Elvis over pizza. Thanks to the drugs Elvis hasn't noticed they're time travellers, so they make a deal with Red: if he makes sure Elvis' life goes as planned, the group will fake his death. Red agrees. Ryan decides to salvage something from Vonnie's failures and spend their **excellent token** to say that the plan works with no need for future time travel, which the group agrees to. With that, the adventure is over.

As Jackson eyes his bogus token, Mei Lin suggests going to the 80s for dessert...



CONFLICTS

BASIC CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In the course of your adventures, you'll eventually get into a conflict. It could be a car chase, a debate, a battle of the bands, or a straight-up fight—the important thing is you're going up against someone who's trying to defeat you.

Retrocausality doesn't have a deep combat system, because of time travel. When you can call in your future self to cover for you in a car chase while you drive back in time to kidnap a stegosaur, rules for shooting somebody seem a little irrelevant.

HANDLING CONFLICT

Most of the time, conflicts are handled like any other action. You decide what you're doing, the Time Lord sets the target, and you try to beat it. **If your opponent is an important character or another player,** the Time Lord may use the rules for Opponents on p. 11.

If you succeed, you beat them. If you fail, they beat you. What this means depends on the story: in a rock-off the winner is the better player, if you're being chased you get away if you succeed, etc. The details are up to you and your group. A failure should never be the end of the game (or a character) unless you want it to be, and the players should know the risks before the conflict.

SETTING TARGETS

Here are the guidelines for setting targets. We go into more detail on p. 41.

- **5** is “easy”. Everyone has a good chance of success.
- **7** is “average”. Talents will succeed most of the time.
- **9** is “hard”. You need at least a +2 Talent for a 50/50 chance at success.
- **11** is “very hard”. You'll probably need a Queen, King, or Ace to succeed.
- **13** is the unlucky number. Above 13, only a Queen, King, or Ace will succeed.
- **A** is a special target the Time Lord may use for some conflicts. With this, *anything besides Ace is a failure*. Players will have to use time travel and roleplay to figure out another way.

Keep in mind that **you can set different targets for different approaches**. A motorcycle chase involving vampires could be tougher at night. A gladiator could have a high difficulty in a fight to the death, a lower difficulty if you're just trying to stay alive long enough to convince him to betray the Emperor, and an even lower one if you flirt with him first. Go with whatever works in the story, and don't be afraid to set a high target where it makes sense.

DETAILED CONFLICTS

If you want the conflict to play out over an entire scene, you can zoom in on it just like you would anything else. Instead of drawing to resolve the conflict, players take turns resolving individual steps—landing a few good hits in a fist fight, getting down a particularly dangerous road in a car chase, laying a tasty bridge in a battle of the bands, etc. The players win if they have more successes than failures at the end.

This is especially handy if the players have multiple objectives. Are they starting a Wild West saloon brawl as a cover while one player steals a treasure map? Have that player draw to steal the map while the others draw to knock down some cowboys.

Different parts of a conflict can have different targets. It's good to have a mix of high/low ones, as they'll generate excellent/bogus tokens to make things interesting later.



TIME CONFLICT

Depending on your time travel rules (and your access to the time machine), you'll sometimes be able to deploy time travel during a conflict. It might even be necessary! Here's the short version:

HOW TO TIME FIGHT

1. Create a Timeline for the conflict.

Create an Event representing the start of the conflict. The group will fill the rest in.

2. Each player describes what they try to do and draws a card.

You're zooming in on the conflict, as described on the previous page. These are regular actions, not time travel actions, so use number targets. Your outcomes determine how the conflict goes.

If you just had a conflict and only decided to time travel afterward, use the outcomes from that.

3. Each group member creates and describes an Event in the conflict.

Go clockwise, starting with the Time Lord. Events can be whatever you like, as long as they're *important moments in the conflict* and *fit the outcomes from the last step*.

4. The group goes through the first round of time travel.

A time conflict is divided into *rounds*. Each round, everyone gets one chance to change the Timeline with time travel. The goal is to tip the end result in your favour. Who goes first is up to the group; whenever someone takes their action, they choose who goes next.

The Time Lord should reward creative plays here. Likewise, players should try not to be boring. "I go back and try to make the conflict not happen" gets old fast.

5. Second round. *You can't use the same time travel action twice in a row.*

You can stop at one round if you want to make it simple. Otherwise, you get two rounds.

Whatever type of action you used last round, you can't do it again. For example, if you used **Fetch** ♥, you can't do **Fetch** ♥ again, but you *can* try **Fetch** ♠ or **Twin** ♥. We're just trying to add some variety, so there's no need to be too strict.

6. The conflict is over!

There needs to be a limit somewhere, so it's here. After two rounds, things become such a mess that further attempts can only make things worse. You may be able to tweak things later, but right now whatever the Timeline says is what you get.

IF YOU'RE FEELING SPICY...

If you want to make a conflict more interesting or turn up the difficulty, here are some things you can try:

RIVAL TIME TRAVELERS

Depending on how your group decided time travel works, you may find yourselves going up against someone who can time travel too. If it's not a big deal, you can bake what they do into the outcomes of PC actions—bogus and failure outcomes mean their opponent got the upper hand. Otherwise, you can toughen the conflict up a bit by:

- Adding **extra rounds**. Conflicts with time travellers can go from two to four rounds, depending on how important your opponent is. The Time Lord decides how many.
- Giving them **actions**. The Time Lord gives them a Time Talent at the start of conflict, and takes an action at the start of each round. (The group gets input on their bogus/failure outcomes.) If the opponent is particularly crafty they could go in the middle instead, or even both if it's a dramatic conflict. (Avoid going at the end, to give them a chance to fight back.)

THE CONFLICT ADVENTURE

Just as you can zoom in on a time travel action to make it a whole adventure (p. 26), you can zoom in on a conflict. In this case it's just a regular Timeline, but players still go through the initial step of creating important Events. If you do this it's a good idea to let the players create **two Events each**, to give them more to work with.

CHAIN CONFLICTS

If the conflict might be *really* long, like a multi-stage Battle of the Bands or a pitched spaceship battle in 3300 AD, you don't *have* to do the whole thing in one go. You can run time conflicts in stages by creating a few Events for major moments in the conflict, then treating each Event as its own smaller time conflict. It's like a fractal of time fights!

This gets a lot more complicated (especially if your time travel rules let the PCs go back into previous stages to Fetch stuff or something), so we recommend reserving this for a climactic conflict unless your group is super into it.

TIME TIPS

When To Start: If you think someone would start the time travel before the original conflict is fully resolved, that's fine. You don't have to wait and see how a fight to the death shakes out before you mess with it. Just make sure the Timeline reflects this.

Extra Selves: Busting out past/future selves does *not* give you extra uses of Time Talents. One per round is all you get. You may work multiple selves into the way you describe it though.

EXCELLENT AND BOGUS TOKENS

Time conflicts mean the players will be drawing a lot of cards in quick succession, so if you get a token during a conflict we recommend you use it as soon as possible. Tokens are kept after a conflict, but the usual rules for how many you can have still apply (p. 11).

Time Lords should avoid using bogus tokens to undo an impending player victory right before the conflict ends—this is something scientists are calling a “jerk move”—but you can use them to add side-effects that keep the story moving.

RESOLUTION

If the time conflict ends and the Timeline looks like it worked out in your favour, you’ve won! Events you overwrote are gone, future selves go back to when they came from (try to remember to be them later), past selves leave to become you, and so on.

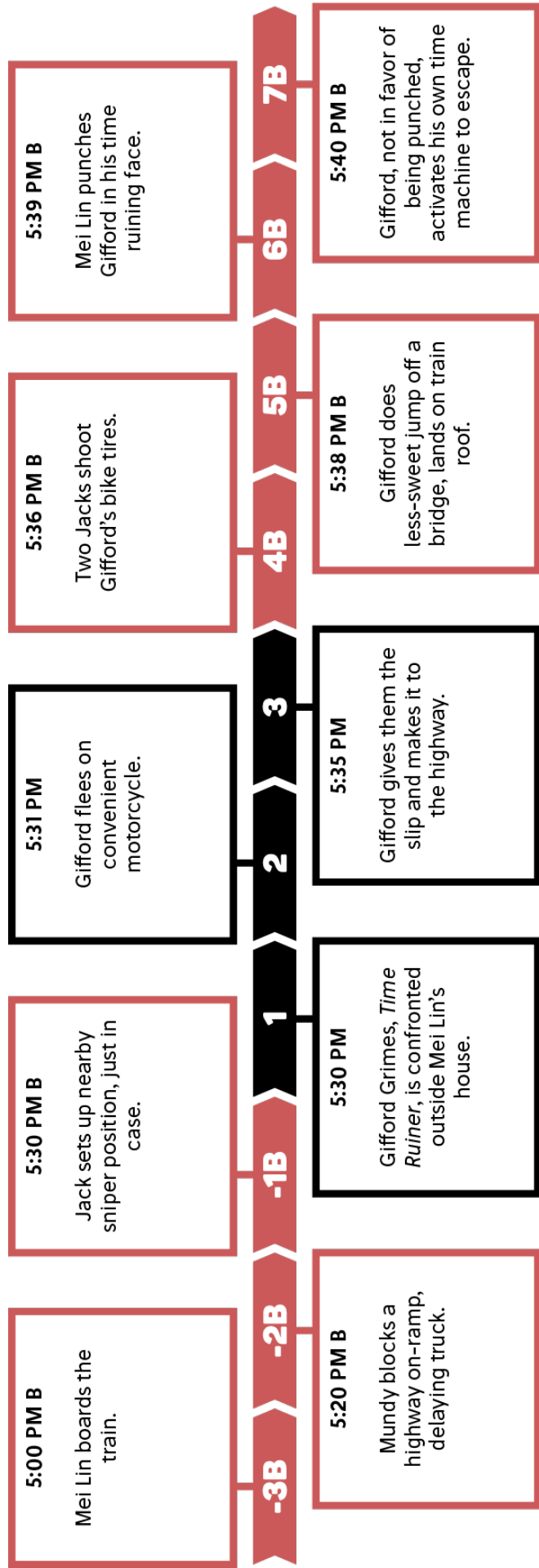
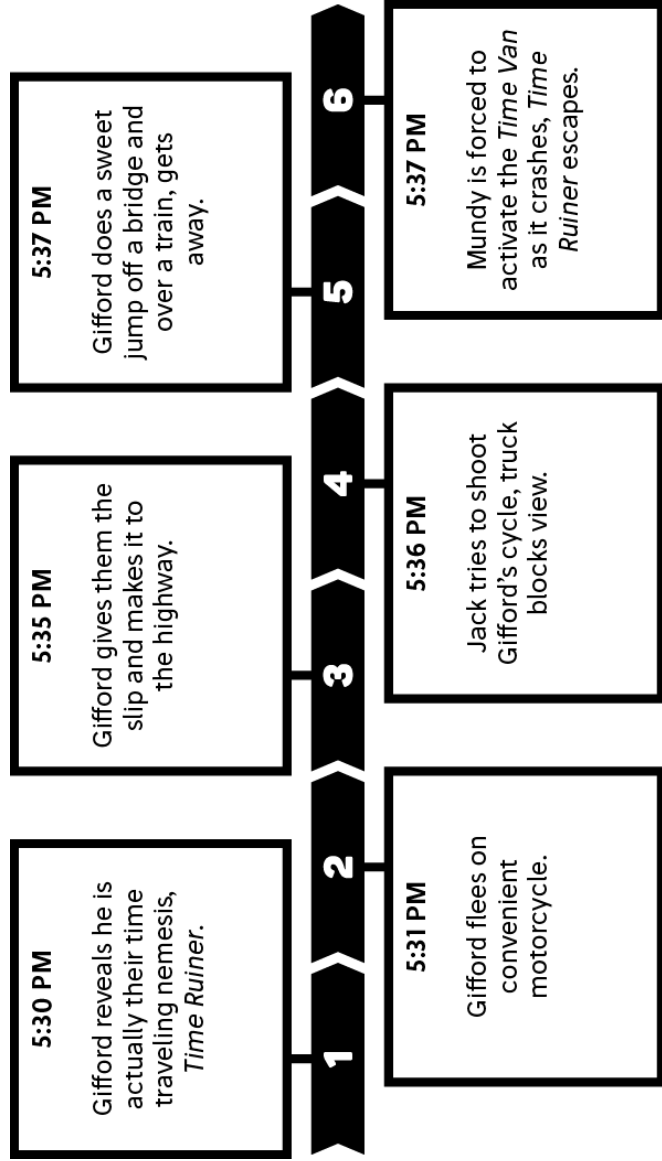
Add an Event for the conflict to whatever timeline you came from, if you haven’t already. You only need to add specific Events you think it’ll be important later. Store the rest, just in case.

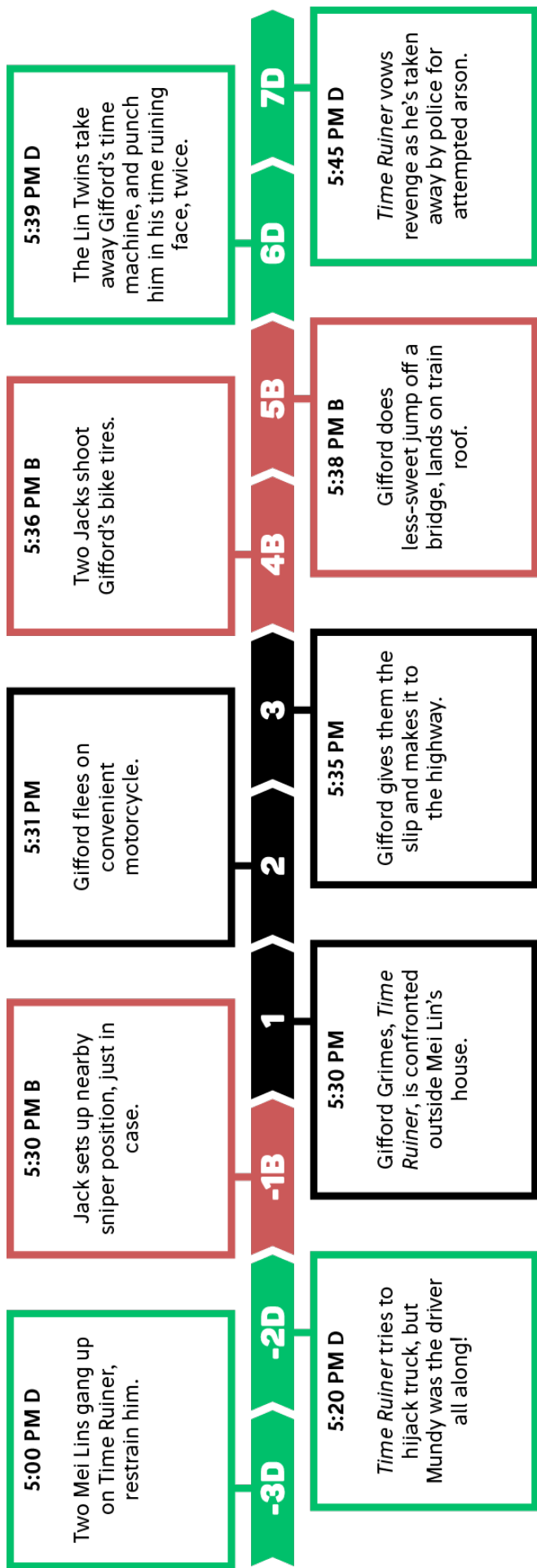
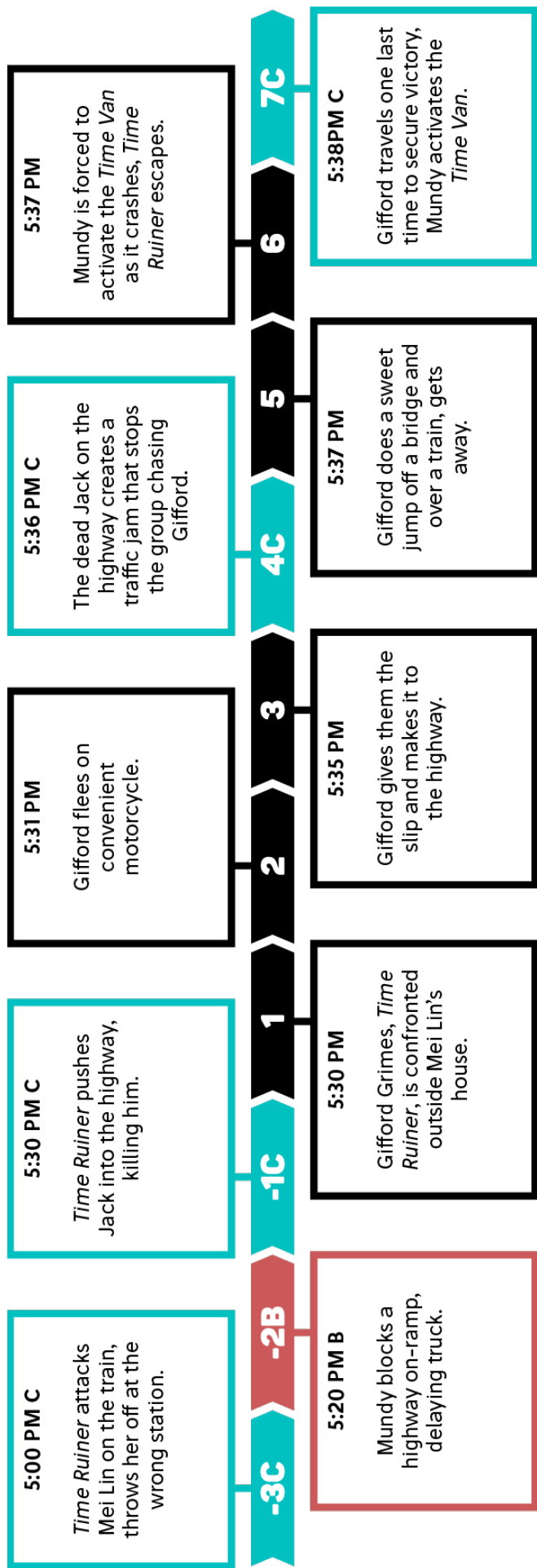
You may be able to go back and redo the conflict later. Too many do-overs would be boring, so if and when this happens is up to the Time Lord. The Time Lord is encouraged to add restrictions, like having to wait a session first or having the time cops get on your back about it.



EXAMPLE TIME CONFLICT

Our heroes have encountered their time-travelling nemesis, Time Ruiner! The GM knows this example needs to fit on two pages, and goes easy on them: the PCs try to catch him with time travel, Time Ruiner tries to ruin it, then they get one more chance to catch him. In a more dramatic encounter, Time Ruiner might get more/better chances to swing things his way.







RUNNING RETROCAUSALITY

We've talked a lot about playing *Retrocausality*. Let's talk about running it.

HERE'S WHAT YOU DO, BASICALLY

The Time Lord's job is to run the session. That means:

- **Preparing:** A game usually starts with a conversation about what kind of characters the group wants to play, and the adventures they want to have. The Time Lord is the one who takes that conversation and plans a game around it. (Or wings it, if they prefer.)
- **Describing what's happening.** Tell them where they are, who else is there, what's happening, what happens when they react to what's happening, and what happens next.
- **Adjudicating the rules.** If the group isn't sure how to apply them, you have final say.
- **Setting targets.** When a player describes their character doing something, you decide if they need to draw a card and what target they need.
- **Side characters.** You control every character that isn't a PC, including the villains.
- **Processing.** When the session ends, talk with your group about how it went. Use that information to make plans, make changes, and create an even *better* story next time.

This chapter is about being the Time Lord, but you don't have to be the Time Lord to read it. Players can take a look too if they like.

In fact, it can benefit them. When you understand how running the game works, it's easier to work with the Time Lord to make sure everyone has a good time.

GENERAL ADVICE

THE CONVERSATION

Roleplaying is, at heart, a conversation. It's you and your friends sitting around and talking about things, except instead of those things being what's going on in your lives it's the lives of a bunch of fictional weirdos you made up.

You talk about the situations they get into, how they handle them, what they do when everything goes pear-shaped, and the fun times they have along the way. Sometimes you talk over each other, interrupt, build on each others' ideas, or get stuck and ask for help, and that's fine. That's how conversations go.

The game's rules mediate that conversation. When someone describes their character doing something, the rules step in. Then they put limits on what people can say afterwards. If the rules say you accidentally pushed Karl Marx down the stairs and ruined politics for a century, nobody gets to say things went well. If the rules say you convinced Marx and Engels to follow through with their plans to move to Texas, nobody gets to say he *doesn't* move to America and become a great President. Either way, in the story you're all telling together, the facts that the rules just created are true.

LOOK FOR MORE RESOURCES

There's a *lot* of advice about how to run RPGs out there. Some of it is even good! If we tried to include it all, this game would fill a bookshelf and cost two thousand dollars.

A good place to start is other games. Many have how-to-run sections like this one, and there are entire books on the topic for all genres and budgets. (Greg Stolze's *How To Run Roleplaying Games* is a good free option that you can find online.)

The Internet is a great resource in general. If you like forums, places like RPGnet have years worth of searchable threads and you can always post more. If you like forums that are Reddit, try r/rpg and its subreddits. If you prefer social media, there's always Twitter, Facebook, going back in time to use Google Plus, or [please write whatever site cool kids use in the future here].

Even if you're a veteran, it's worth looking up what others have to say, trying new things, and seeing what works for you. Heck, I adapted some of Chris Longhurst's work from the excellent *Pigsmoke: The Roleplaying Game of Sorcerous Academia* for *The Conversation*. (Thanks, Chris.)

DURING THE GAME

TARGETS AND OUTCOMES

You should only set a target if success or failure would both be interesting. If a failure would be boring or wouldn't do anything besides stall the story, consider doing something else.

If you need to set a number target and you're not sure what it should be, try this reference. (Remember, you can set any number.)

- **5: Easy.** Without a Talent, you will succeed around 2/3 of the time. Nobody with a Talent can get a bogus failure. Use this if they're attempting something most people could do.
- **7: Average.** Without a Talent, you will succeed around half the time. +2 will succeed around 2/3 of the time. It's *just* possible to get a bogus failure with a +1 Talent. Use 6 or 7 when the players should *probably* succeed.
- **9: Hard.** Without a Talent, you succeed around 1/3 of the time. +3 will succeed a little under 2/3 of the time. Anyone can get a bogus failure. Go with this if you want to present a challenge to someone using their +3 Talent.
- **11: Very hard.** Even a +3 Talent succeeds less than half the time. You will probably need Q, K, or A. Use this for serious threats, where the odds are supposed to be slim.
- **13+: Yikes.** The plateau. Every number past 13 has the same odds. A +3 Talent can succeed by drawing a 10; otherwise, only Q, K, or A succeeds. Targets this high should be rare, but they're useful when you want to make it clear the PCs should be using time travel.
- **A: Impossible... Unless...** You can set number targets to Ace, but the odds of success are less than 8%. Instead of using A as an unbeatable challenge, use this target to represent a puzzle: perhaps the PCs can do something else first to reduce the difficulty, or find another way around it.

Remember: **different ways to solve a problem can have different targets.** For example, if the PCs encounter high-tech aliens with laser guns, you can say fighting them is A, but reasoning with them is 10. If they get lasers of their own, maybe fighting them drops to 9. If they find out the aliens love basketball and challenge them to a game, you could even drop the target to 4. Encourage the players to find different approaches, and feel free to change the target as needed.

CHARACTER ADVANCEMENT

When you play multiple sessions, your characters will inevitably learn things, change, and grow as people. Here's how our character advancement system works. (Feel free to change these guidelines, especially if the way you play changes how your games are paced.)

DEAL

You can change your Deal whenever it seems appropriate. Remember to keep it short.

TALENTS

As your character changes and grows, your Talents should too. Here's a guideline:

- At the end of every session, you gain **+1 Talent point**. You may use it to raise an existing Talent by one, or create an entirely new Talent rated at +1.
- The highest a Talent can go is **+3**.
- At the end of a major plot arc (or every few sessions, roughly), you may **swap the ratings of two Talents** or **rename one Talent** to represent your character changing.

TIME TALENTS

Every few sessions, you may change your Time Talent. (They mostly represent your preferred method of using time travel, and sometimes preferences change.) This should happen at the end of a session.

GOAL

Players can change their character's Goal whenever they accomplish it, at the start of a session, or whenever a suitably dramatic moment occurs if the group deems it appropriate. Goals have no effect on the game besides helping to inform your character's actions, so these are just guidelines to remind you to check whether you need a new Goal every so often.

DETAILS

Details should be updated as you go, whenever you deem it necessary.

Retrocausality doesn't have in-depth advancement because it's not designed for long-term play (at least not with the same characters). If you'd like to stick to the same ones, consider these optional untested rules:

- At the end of the 5th session and every 5 thereafter, you may increase one Talent's maximum to +4.
- After the characters have a few adventures under their belt (a *Back to the Future* trilogy's worth, say), consider adding a second Suit or Skill to their Time Talent. (So if you have Twin ♣, you could also get Twin ♠ or Fetch ♣.)
- Instead of improving the same character, create a second character after 5-10 sessions. You can swap to a different character every few scenes, and advance one at a time. Only use this if the Time Lord feels like tracking them all.

TIME LORD TIPS

Don't Panic

It's fine if you need a pause to figure out what'll happen next. It's fine if you make a mistake. It's fine if your game doesn't run as smoothly as your favourite podcast. It's fine if you don't remember *exactly* how the Battle of Hastings went down. Do your best and things will work out.

First Among Equals

It's everyone's job to make the game fun. If you have a problem, or you're not sure what should happen next, it's okay to talk to the players and work with them to come up with a solution. You get the last word in a rules dispute, but try to figure it out as a group first.

Give Everyone Time To Shine

Everyone should get a chance to do something cool before the session ends. Throw in challenges that play to their Talents. Find ways to work their character's backstory and personality into the story. If there's something you can do to make someone feel awesome, do it!

This Isn't The Hill Valley Railroad

It's good to have a general idea of how things will go, but don't force the group into a prewritten story. If they want to go off the rails, let them and see what happens! This especially applies to the Timeline—don't force things to happen the way you want them to. You're not its mom, it doesn't need you to chaperone it.

This *especially* applies if things go badly for the group. If you intervene and remove the consequences for failure, you'll make things less fun. A proper sense of adventure includes the possibility that you'll fail and will have to deal with that.

Keep Things Moving

That said, if the players seem stuck it's okay to give them a nudge. Suggest things to do, throw something new at them, give them extra information—as long as you keep things moving, it's all good.

Story Beats Mechanics

The rules are there to help the story. If you want to do something that isn't really covered by the rules, do it. If a rule seems to be getting in the way, change it. If you want to borrow a rule from another system, do it.

USING THE TIMELINE

At some point, unless you *really* screw up, you will do a time travel. Here are some suggestions for how to manage the Timeline.

Do What Works For You

You don't have to represent the Timeline with index cards if you don't want to. If you'd rather share a digital document, draw on graph paper, or just remember everything like a badass, go for it. As long as you can keep track of everything, it's fine.

Know Where It All Started

At some point, someone is going to want to go back and make everything that happened not happen. Plan for it!

Know Where It Ends (But Don't Tell Anyone)

Ask yourself how this adventure ends *if everything goes according to plan*. If you know what would happen if it does, it's easier to decide what will happen when it doesn't.

Don't Worry, Get Creative

Never worry about messing up the Timeline. That's what it's for. If you're worried an Event is "too silly" to go on the Timeline, it's not. The more creative you get, the more fun *Retrocausality* is. Catastrophic failures and dystopian futures are just the icing on the time cake.

"Bogus" Doesn't Mean "Game Changer"

Using a bogus success to change the Timeline is fine (in fact, that's what they're for), but drastic changes that directly affect what you're doing should be rare – it's still a success, after all. If you're trying to borrow Lincoln's hat unnoticed for a few minutes, get a bogus success, and accidentally kill him in the process, that wasn't really a *success*, was it?

I Hope You Like Bookkeeping

If you have trouble keeping track of the Timeline as it shifts and changes, try jotting down a few notes between major changes. This will let you keep track of what the Timeline used to look like without having to sift through the Event cards every time. They don't have to be detailed notes, just enough to help you keep things straight.

It can also help to keep your own notes if you want to track something that's not worth putting on the Timeline, or that the players don't know (like a villain's progress). Also, if you do this you can sometimes pretend to be taking secret notes when you're not and keep them guessing. (Don't do this a lot, they'll hate you and they'd be right to.)

STUDY HISTORY

Before you start a time travel game, it's worth doing a little research. Destroying history is easier when you know where the load-bearing pillars are.

How much research you do is up to you. There's no such thing as too much research, but however much you think you need is perfect. Wikipedia is usually good enough if you can avoid the siren call of wikicrawling, though certain topics can fall prey to bias. (Articles on women and people in other under-represented groups tend to be absent or low on details, for example, though there are efforts to change that.) If you need more information, head to a library or look for other reputable sources.

Even if you know about the subject, it's worth checking your sources. School curricula often leave things out for the sake of time, sanitizing their country's past, or justifying cultural attitudes. TV shows have been known to exaggerate or dramatize events for entertainment purposes. You don't need to worry about accuracy too much for a time travel RPG, but you might find that the truth is a better plot hook.

Finally, **research people as well as events.** Knowing things like how the people in your chosen place and time talked, what they wore and ate, and where they liked to hang out will really help your descriptions, enhance your characters, and get your players in a time travel mood.



PLAYING SAFELY IN A SCIFI UNIVERSE

It's everyone's job to make the game fun, and that means supporting each other.

WHAT SUPPORT MEANS

So what are we talking about when we talk about supporting people? Support can mean but is not limited to¹:

- Establishing boundaries
- Resolving conflicts
- Encouraging others when they do something cool
- Helping others if they get uncomfortable
- Avoiding making others uncomfortable in the first place
- Having a plan for when everything goes pear-shaped anyway

Thinking about support and how you do it is a good idea, even if you think you've got it worked out. It makes the game better, it makes play smoother, and learning how to care for your friends is a life skill that will help you out-of-game as well.

SUPPORT AND TIME TRAVEL

Retrocausality can be troublesome in this regard, because its subject matter is human history.

There are many places, events, and time periods that some players may be uncomfortable exploring. They might be too personal for a variety of valid reasons, or using them in a game might feel inappropriate, or maybe the players just feel like something softer right now, *Kevin*.

On the flip side, they may be uncomfortable exploring them with their current player character. Someone who makes a religious character would not necessarily appreciate the Time Lord exploring past persecution of their faith, for example.

So, what can you do? Here are some pointers.

Talk with your group. Much like time travel, the best way to deal with a problem is to make sure you don't have one in the first place. Have a discussion with your group about potential problems and how they'd like things to be handled. Even just checking up on them every once in a while can go a long way. Be respectful, supportive, and understanding.

Study history. We just covered this on the previous page, but it's worth repeating. Even a little research can go a long way towards understanding what to do.

You don't *have* to be "realistic". If your game would be better without "historically-accurate" things that would make people uncomfortable, you can just ditch them. It probably wasn't going to be historically accurate anyway, let's be honest.

¹ This is usually the point where someone says "*why do we need this? It's just a game*". The answer is because it *is* just a game, and making sure everyone is enjoying themselves is how you keep it that way.

SUPPORT TIPS

Other game designers have created tools that can help you support other players, if you need them. Like the rest of this chapter, a full accounting of every useful tip and tool could fill whole books on its own². Instead, let's cover some basics:

Seriously, talk with your group. It's worth repeating. Communication makes the game work. Everything in this section eventually comes back to learning how to talk to other people and about yourself. Check in with them every so often. Everyone should be working to support everyone else too; don't put the burden all on the Time Lord.

Only do what you can. Sometimes you don't have the emotional energy to support someone. Sometimes you can't provide support in a helpful way, or they don't want you to. Sometimes you don't really feel like reading an entire book on the Joseon Dynasty. That's fine. You don't and shouldn't have to push yourself. Self-care is important!

Support means different things to different people. For example, one popular support tool is Jon Stavropoulos' *X-Card*. You should look up the details, but basically you have an index card with an X drawn on it. If a player is uncomfortable with something that comes up in the game, they can tap or display the card and the group will change the content, wind it back, or skip the scene entirely.

It's a good tool for many people, but what about people who freeze up when they get anxious? What about people who don't use it because it makes them feel like they're spoiling the game, or who find the idea of basically glossing over what just happened and moving on uncomfortable as well? These are all valid reactions, and they're ones the X-Card isn't equipped for.

This isn't to say that it's a bad idea, just that you should make sure your support plans work for the people you are gaming with. Don't just add a support tool for the sake of having one.

Your plans and tools are going to fail. No plan is foolproof, and no tool is a complete solution. Eventually you will run into a situation that they can't handle. Again, communication is your friend here. Learn how to handle mediation and conflict resolution and you should be able to properly address most things that come up.

Support means affirmation, too. Support should not just be about avoiding and dealing with conflict. If you had fun, someone did something cool, or something happened that you'd like to see more of, say something. People should know when they're doing a good thing; it feels good and it encourages them to do more good things in the future.

Don't be a jerk. Tabletop RPGs rely on communication, and if your group doesn't trust you enough to communicate with you properly your games will suffer for it. When people discuss problems with you, listen and take them seriously. Don't test people's boundaries unless you're their therapist and they let you. Try not to take things personally when people discuss problems with you; everyone makes mistakes. Learn how to apologise (that includes acknowledging when you do something wrong and doing better).

² Searching online for RPG support tools, tips, and advice is a great idea. Some good starting points are the X- and O-Cards, Lines and Veils, and the Luxton Techniques.



APPENDIX R

THE “R” IS FOR “RETROCAUSALITY”

This chapter contains important things that don’t fit neatly into the other chapters. That includes:

- Some **premade characters** and time travel rules for fast setup.
- Some thanks for our **Kickstarter backers!**
- A **character sheet** you can print and use if you’d like to get fancy.

PREMADE: TIME VAN ADVENTURES

Pages 50-53 contain some **premade player characters** you can use in your games. Use and adapt them in any way you like.

For writing purposes, we’re using a simple setting we call *Time Van*. In *Time Van*, the time machine is a van built by an eccentric Professor in the mid-2010s. The rules of the Time Van are similar to *Back to the Future*:

- Time travel is made possible by the Quantum Engine, which is built into the Time Van.
- The Quantum Engine needs a lot of power. Assume fuel can be obtained in the 21st century onward; otherwise, the Time Van has backup solar panels that charge it in 48 hours.
- The Quantum Engine travels through time using something called the Time Vortex. To enter it, the Time Van must be travelling at a cool 88 MPH. Yes, most speed limits in the world are lower than this. No, the Time Van has never got a ticket.
- When you accidentally do something that erases a time traveller’s past, you have about a week to fix it before they fade away completely.

We’ve included a total of eight premade PCs. The first four are the “standard” Time Van team: **Professor Mundy** is the eccentric inventor of the time machine, **Mei Lin** is his neighbour and the group’s muscle, **Vonnie Malfête** is her book-smart friend, and **Jack Sanchez** is a youth who works for the Professor.

The second four were created by Kickstarter backers. They’re people who got dragged into the Time Van’s adventures: **Shiang Mackenzie** is a hacker from the 1940s, **Jacob Fisher** is an everyman who keeps encountering the Time Van by accident, **Rodney Leary** is a gamer friend of the Professor, and **Willow** is a dog from the future.



Ross Mundy is an eccentric inventor and former rocker from Australia. He created the Quantum Engine which makes time travel possible, and funds his work by making inventions for the kind of people who throw money at anything if you use words like “disruption”. He’s a smart guy who means well, but he’s a little too naive and carefree for someone messing with time.

TALENTS

Genius Inventor	+3
Inspiring Teacher	+2
Former Rocker	+1

TIME TALENT

Observe ♦

PROFESSOR MUNDY

Mei Lin is a local college student who befriended Mundy because they’re neighbours. She tries to balance her studies with helping her dad’s failing video rental business, but really she just wants to laze around watching martial arts movies and gaming all day. Though she’s kind of a slob, she knows how to fight and acts as the group’s muscle.

TALENTS

History Undergrad	+3
Martial Artist	+2
Easygoing Attitude	+1

TIME TALENT

Twin ♣



MEI LIN

Yvonne “Vonnie” Malfête is a friend of Mei Lin from high school who gets dragged on her adventures a lot. Vonnie’s parents are businessmen, and she’s under a lot of pressure to graduate with honors and inherit their tech company. Vonnie is more mature and well-read than her friends, and often has to rein them in when they act too silly. In exchange, they try to get her to loosen up a little.

TALENTS

Book Smarts	+3
Tech Company Heiress	+2
Ladylike Grace	+1

TIME TALENT

History ♥



VONNIE MALFÊTE

A hip lad who works for Mundy’s inventing business. Jack is a friendly and adventurous go-getter who likes being prepared for anything; he carries a backpack full of useful things just in case he needs them. He also has a guitar, but after hearing him practice everyone else made him leave it at home.

TALENTS

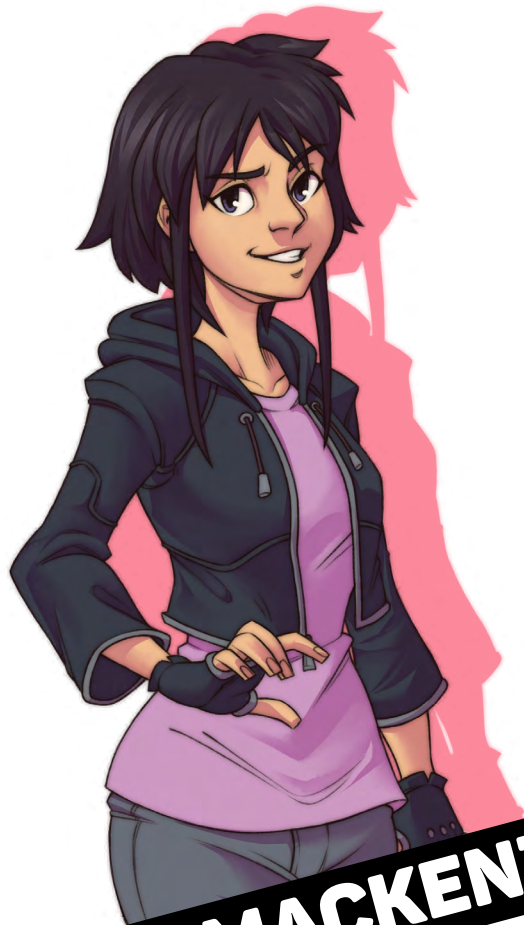
Street Smarts	+3
Pack of Useful Things	+2
	+1

TIME TALENT

Fetch ♣



JACK SANCHEZ



SHIANG MACKENZIE

Shiang was a pastry shop worker in Singapore in 1945. When the Time Van passed through, she stowed away on it and invited herself to the group. She's an impish thrillseeker who gets along well with others, but tends to be dismissive about the consequences of her actions until they blow up in her face. After living a few years in the 1990s, she's become great with computers too.

TALENTS

Charming Imp	+3
Grey Hat Hacker	+2
Sneaky Rogue	+1

TIME TALENT

Observe ♥

Jacob is an average 21st century man who keeps encountering the Time Van at different points in his life. Each time, he ends up either being kidnapped by or running away from historical figures. He's not happy about it, but being dragged across time against his will has given him a lot of experience.

TALENTS

Running Away	+3
Hiding From Trouble	+2
Unwilling Historian	+1

TIME TALENT

Twin ♠



JACOB FISHER

Rodney is an old friend of Mundy who sometimes helps out with his projects. Lately, that's meant joining him in the Time Van. Rodney makes fantasy RPGs for a living, and uses his game design skills to find unconventional solutions to problems. If solutions don't easily come to mind, he isn't against letting the dice decide. He sometimes goes by the nickname "Threedeesix", especially in the past.

TALENTS

Game Designer	+3
History Buff	+2
Tinkerer	+1

TIME TALENT

Fetch ♦



RODNEY LEARY



WILLOW

Willow is a dog from the future who befriended the Time Van team. She wears an intelligence-enhancing collar which also lets her talk and change her size; she can get as big as a horse if needed. She's protective of her friends, but a lot of it's out of anxiety. It takes a while to get on her good side, so she tends to bark a lot at strangers.

TALENTS

Intelligent Dog	+3
Size-Changing Collar	+2
Protecting Her Friends	+1

TIME TALENT

History ♣

BACKER CREDITS

Retrocausality was made possible thanks to these Kickstarter backers!

ART BACKERS

Paul Booth
Dominic Brodowski
I.K.
Lyrar

CHARACTER BACKERS

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Hostile V
Rodney Leary
Cassidy Smith

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[insert quest here]
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RETROCAUSALITY

DEAL

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GOAL

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DETAILS

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NAME:

PLAYER:

TALENTS

3

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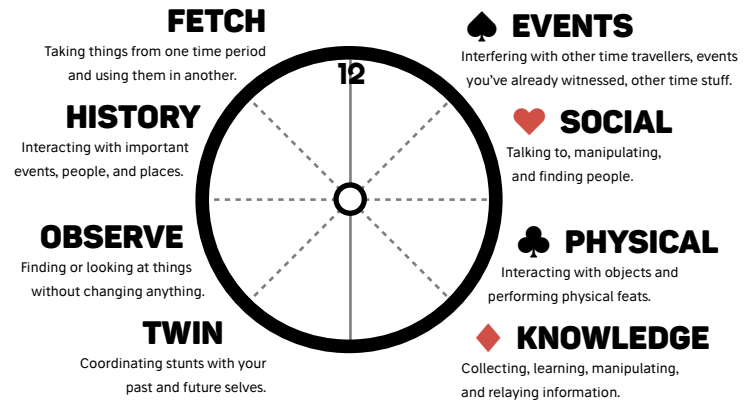
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TIME TALENT draw hands or shade in the clock.



RETROCAUSALITY

DEAL

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GOAL

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DETAILS

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NAME:

PLAYER:

TALENTS

3

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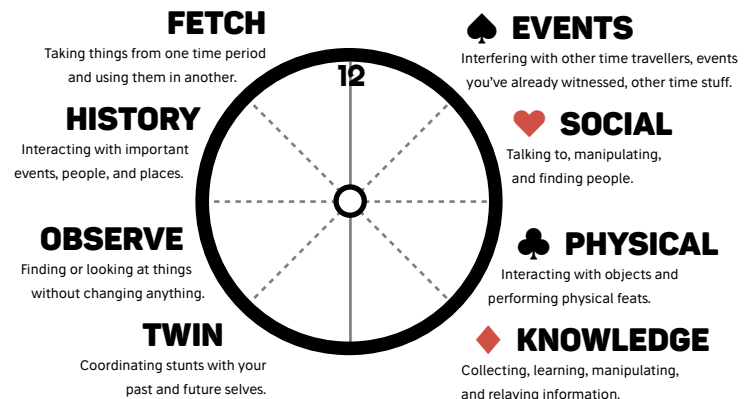
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TIME TALENT draw hands or shade in the clock.



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